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Danesi, Marcel, Understanding Media Semiotics. Arnold, London, 2002. ISBN 0 340 80884 5. x+253 pp, pb, A\$**. **.

Machin, David. Ethnographic Research for Media Studies. Arnold, London, 2002. ISBN 0 340 80688 5. 181 pp, pb, A\$**. **.

These two books have very similar goals: to introduce beginners, at undergraduate levels, to complex concepts and methods for the understanding and analysis of contemporary media. Both draw on research traditions and literatures from disciplines predating media studies as such (semiotics and ethnography respectively) but which are now very much part of the media analyst's armoury. To that extent both are to be welcomed as either course texts or supplementary readings for introductory courses in media studies. There is, however, one thing they have in common, which I will introduce in due course, and which is, in my humble view, possibly the methodological problem haunting media and cultural studies today.

1.

Danesi's job is no doubt the hardest of the two. It is notoriously difficult to teach semiotics to beginners. So many different varieties of semiotics are on sale today and not all of them are commensurable. Add to this the problem of applying so many distinct approaches to a plethora of different media (in this case: print, audio, film, TV, the internet and advertising), all of which are industries with histories that need at least some explication over and above their treatment as textual sites, and the task becomes herculean. How Danesi approaches his task is to leave the question of approach — of what constitutes semiotic analysis proper — well and truly open. This allows him a horses-for-courses brief that can even be stretched to encompass elements of psychoanalysis, mythological analysis, Schramm-type (SMCR) studies and other non-semiotic approaches.

What holds all this together is the rather vague concept of representation, taken here, most frequently, in a quasi-cognitivist sense of mental contents. As Danesi makes clear from the start, the basic formula is $X=Y$, where X is some media element, Y is a thought construct (though it is also occasionally allowed to be purely material), and the equals sign translates not as 'is identical with' but as 'represents' or 'stands for'.

We know that representation is a stock-in-trade concept for media and cultural studies, but also that it is radically undertheorised in those fields which are often — interdisciplinary as they claim to be — loathe to engage with the philosophical tradition that has been working on this very concept, as a concept, since the pre-socratics. (An astonishing example in this respect is Hall's Representation: Cultural Representations and Signifying Practice (1997) which ends up repeating

Descartes for want of knowing him.) Danesi's definition of 'representation', in this light, appears somewhat simplistic: 'the process of giving a form to some referent [Y?] with signs [X?]' (p227).

This allows a great deal of latitude for playing fast and loose with distinct theories of semiosis. Referents, accordingly, can transform into signifieds, signs into signifiers, and meaning(s) into signification(s). And vice versa. For example, we learn that Aristotle:

defined the sign as consisting of three dimensions: (1) the physical part of the sign itself (e.g. the sounds that make up a word such a 'rabbit'); (2) the referent to which it calls attention (a certain category of animal), (3) its evocation of a meaning (what the referent entails psychologically and socially). As we saw in the previous chapter, nowadays (1) is called the 'signifier', (2) the 'signified', and (3) 'signification'. (p29)

The Saussurean terms are unfortunate here. The Aristotelian trio might, at the limit, be contorted to map on to Peirce's Representamen, Object and Interpretant; but the equation with Saussure neglects the latter's radical insistence that semiotics confine itself to the sign-side of the sign-referent distinction (while not denying the existence of the referent) and to move ahead by taking both signifier and signified as sub-components of the sign as such, with 'signification' specified at their mutual relation. This is not a minor quibble with Danesi's self-avowed "'cut and paste" approach' (p31). In the Saussurean model, especially in its later uptake by Greimas and the Paris School, signification (the 'sign relation') can be, but need not be, representational in character. This allows modes of thinking about semiosis leading well beyond X=Y representationalism, and in ways that are not so confusing to beginners as the 'cut and paste' approach.

For all of these problems in, as it were, the theoretical basement of Danesi's textbook, beginners will gain much from its actual analyses of media texts (interspersed with potted media histories). They will also, equally usefully, be gradually steered away from any remaining knee-jerk views about contemporary media as a 'psychologically toxic' 'distraction factory'.

2.

Machin, by contrast, needs less conceptual baggage. His concern is to get beginners in media analysis to go out and actually do ethnographic work, to get off their elevated couches, as it were; to get down and explore what ordinary folk (especially audiences) actually do there in the media village. At the cornerstone of the book is what Machin calls 'the ethnographic gaze' — with 'the gaze' now revalorised as a positive research tool and Laura Mulvey et al confined to history's rubbish-bin as mere theoreticism that ignores what 'audiences themselves are thinking' (p72). Still the untheorised ghost of representation walks abroad even here:

What we ... need to do is to look at how the person in fact behaves in different settings. This is what the ethnographic gaze should be all about. We need to see people as social actors who, along with talking about the world in order make sense of it, are also concerned to find and indicate their own place in the world. And the way that people talk, as we have just seen, is strongly influenced by representations which are available to them in their culture. (p13)

So, to be sure, the talk, Danesi's X, is to be collected and inspected in some detail – and this talk is taken as part of a broader social 'conversation' that the mass media supposedly contribute to – but what it is inspected for is Danesi's Y, represented stuff. For example, there is speculation about whether children's talk about TV programs could be an indication of their actually saying what they believe adult researchers want to hear (p160); whether their surface talk could be an (unknowing) use of a Reithian model of public broadcasting (p160); or whether their 'strange' defences of mere entertainment as in fact educational could be a literal representation of their beliefs (p159), etc. Most of these speculations are doubted, but the 'real' situation with kids' talk about TV is explicated as follows (in the context of a discussion about one child's ambivalent talk about TV cartoons):

What is Nikita's real opinion or belief? Does she like cartoons or not? As we saw in the last chapter it is not productive to approach our data with that kind of question. What is important is that we acknowledge that Nikita, like other speakers, experiences herself through the alignments that she makes through her interactions. In both of these cases [the positive and negative remarks about cartoons] Nikita is able to present a particular kind of agency. (p162)

And that presentation (or is it representation?) of a 'kind of agency' is then placed in the context of broader 'discourses' about childhood summarised (via Coward) as a 'language of public responsibility and caring' (p163). Hence:

children are aware of all these discourses which suffuse the culture in which they live, which people use to talk about both television and children. This discourse appears to the children as common sense and as naturally reflecting the way the world is. (p163)

So what children's talk about television (X) actually represents (=) is a broader discourse about children themselves as ideal community members (Y), propagated, inter alia, by the very programs they are discussing in the study and programs like them. The Y-side of the equation has now become socially and 'discursively' rather than psychologically ghostly. But it remain a mere representationalist or interpretivist speculation.

Early on in the book, citing his disciplinary allegiances, Machin makes passing

reference to Harold Garfinkel, stating that his (Machin's) approach is 'strongly influenced by ethnomethodology' (p38). But one of the most incisive lessons of ethnomethodology – aside from its rejection of the standardised aggregationist methods of formal social science (see Machin pp81-89) – is that there are deep and abiding problems with assuming a representationalist picture of how social order actually works. Ethnomethodology, that is, does not go looking for 'what more' (Y) lies beneath the ordinary everyday methods of order production (X). It does not need to because they are available in material audio-visual forms (e.g., talk) to all practically-oriented members going about their lives.

In Ethnomethodology's Program (2002), Garfinkel amplifies this position from the earlier (1967) Studies in Ethnomethodology. The ordinary methods that he wants to investigate, he writes, 'preclude the use of proxies. They are without the possibility that indicators can stand for them or that indicators can be interpreted to exhibit their contents' (p111). Ethnomethodology, then, involves 'avoiding the design and administration of generic representations and their methodologized dopes' (p117). 'Nowhere here', he continues later, 'are we talking of ... signs/indications/marks/codes/symbols' (p161). Much less should everyday practices be transformed into analysts' occasions for 'finding and reading signs' (p160) of mysteriously hidden 'knowledge and beliefs' (p140).

This is something that media ethnography and media semiotics could well attend to. There are ways of laying the ghost of representationalism – and beginners especially need to know about them. Jalbert's edited collection, Media Studies: Ethnomethodological Approaches (2000) is one place to start.

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